# Unit X: Introduction

### 35,000 Years of Art History

## Unit Student Learning Objectives

### Unit 1: Modernism (one week)

At the end of this unit, students will be able to:

1. Identify general terminology associated with Art History (Course Goals: 1,2,4,5, GE: 1,4,6,7, Core skills: A, D, E)
2. Identify key terms and elements associated with Modernism, Abstraction, and Expressionism (Course Goals: 1,2,4,5, GE: 1,4,6,7, Core skills: A, D, E)
3. Question the theory and philosophy behind the movement, with emphasis on Sartre. (Course Goals: 2,3,4,5,6 GE: 1,4,6,7,9 core skills: A, B, C, E, F, G)

## Unit Student Assessments & Activities

### Class 1: Introduction (ULO 3-4)

Venus of Willendorf, 20,000 bce

Venus of Willendorf, 20,000 bce

Our course starts in New York in the 1940s, but 35,000 years of recorded art history exist before this point. Next week, we will pick after the world wars with Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting, and see what happened when New York became the center of the art world. But before we touch down with both feet running, what should we be aware of, what lessons from the past can we take with us?

#### Textbook readings

For this first week, there are no readings from the book, but make sure you buy it in time to do next weeks reading assignment. Instead, we start right off with the slideshows introducing some key topics.

#### Slideshows

In the slideshows in unit 1, we pull apart the terms "Abstract", "Expressionism" and "Color Field" and trace them through the timeline of art history to see where they come from. We first look at a very few select pieces of work, from as old as the Venus figurine from Hohle Fels, made of Mammoth Ivory, up to a couple American works from 1950. Stretching them into a timeline, we discuss the spectrum from realism to abstraction, and discover realism encompasses a relatively small part of the history of art.

Next, we examine what factors cause artists to return to abstraction in the 1800s. I introduce the term "artistic crisis" here, which is something we are going to see several times in this course. Very broadly, this refers to an external factor that causes artists to feel that the way art has been made up to that point is no longer adequate, and a new way of making art is needed. This can be brought about through external events such as natural disasters or wars, it can be caused by new technological advances, and it can also come about when new philosophical ideas are introduced into public thought. Before finding out the answer in the slideshow, do you have any guesses as to what happened between 1800 and 1900 that would cause artists to return to abstraction?

We then start to ask a big question that will come up again in this course, "Why when they can paint pretty pictures, would artists also paint disturbing ones?" We also look at the difference between "formalism" and "expressionism" along the path of understanding of what "expressionism" means. Keep in mind though, that we will find both expressionism and formalism in next weeks artworks.

#### Reading

The reading this week is a bit of philosophy. The writing is a little hard to get through, but don't worry, they wont all be this dense or philosophical. The main point in the article is for Sartre to defend "existentialism", the philosophical movement that he was part of. We're reading this because the ideas presented tie directly into the ideas that our artists next week are struggling with. And in the discussion board this week, you have a change to apply what you find in this reading to some of the artworks from the slideshows.

### **Readings**: (ULO 3, 4)

### Jean-Paul Sartre "Existentialism is Humanism"

#### Introduction

*This excerpt is from a lecture given in 1956, where Sartre's main interest was defending his philosophical idea of existentialism against the main criticisms that had been made against it. It was delivered in French, and this translation is by Philip Mairet. The spelling is particularly British, so don't let words like "defence", "endeavour", and "scandalise" throw you off. As will be true with much of the readings we will have in this class, I have edited out a lot in order to make it easier for you to find the important points. If you are interested, you can find the* [*full text*](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm) *and more information about the author at* [*this website*](hhttp://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/)*.*

#### Main Points

Before we begin, I want to outline the most important points to look for in this article:

1. We are responsible for defining ourselves. It is not fate, but what we do that determines who we become.
2. By realizing that we have this choice, we become free, but with this liberty comes responsibility.
3. When we become aware that we are responsible for our actions, this responsibility gives us much anxiety.
4. It doesn't matter if God exists or not, we are still responsible for making the right choices.

#### Existentialism Is a Humanism

My purpose here is to offer a defence of existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it.

Most of those who are making use of this word would be highly confused if required to explain its meaning. For since it has become fashionable, people cheerfully declare that this musician or that painter is “existentialist.” All the same, it can easily be defined.

The question is only complicated because there are two kinds of existentialists. There are, on the one hand, the Christians, amongst whom I shall name Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics; and on the other the existential atheists, amongst whom we must place Heidegger as well as the French existentialists and myself. What they have in common is simply the fact that they believe that existence comes before essence – or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective. What exactly do we mean by that?

When we think of God as the creator, we are thinking of him, most of the time, as a supernal artisan. Whatever doctrine we may be considering, we always imply that the will follows, more or less, from the understanding or at least accompanies it, so that when God creates he knows precisely what he is creating. God makes man according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a paper-knife, following a definition and a formula. Thus each individual man is the realisation of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding. . Man possesses a human nature; that “human nature,” which is the conception of human being, is found in every man; which means that each man is a particular example of a universal conception, the conception of Man.

Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. But what do we mean to say by this, but that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table? For we mean to say that man primarily exists – that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be. If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole. If I am a worker, for instance, I may choose to join a Christian rather than a Communist trade union. And if, by that membership, I choose to signify that resignation is, after all, the attitude that best becomes a man, that man’s kingdom is not upon this earth, I do not commit myself alone to that view. Resignation is my will for everyone, and my action is, in consequence, a commitment on behalf of all mankind. Or if, to take a more personal case, I decide to marry and to have children, even though this decision proceeds simply from my situation, from my passion or my desire, I am thereby committing not only myself, but humanity as a whole, to the practice of monogamy. I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man.

This may enable us to understand what is meant by such terms – perhaps a little grandiloquent – as anguish, abandonment and despair. As you will soon see, it is very simple. First, what do we mean by anguish? – The existentialist frankly states that man is in anguish. His meaning is as follows: When a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind – in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. There are many, indeed, who show no such anxiety. But we affirm that they are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it. Certainly, many people think that in what they are doing they commit no one but themselves to anything: and if you ask them, “What would happen if everyone did so?” they shrug their shoulders and reply, “Everyone does not do so.” But in truth, one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing; nor can one escape from that disturbing thought except by a kind of self-deception. The man who lies in self-excuse, by saying “Everyone will not do it” must be ill at ease in his conscience, for the act of lying implies the universal value which it denies. By its very disguise his anguish reveals itself.

Who, then, can prove that I am the proper person to impose, by my own choice, my conception of man upon mankind? I shall never find any proof whatever; there will be no sign to convince me of it. If a voice speaks to me, it is still I myself who must decide whether the voice is or is not that of an angel. If I regard a certain course of action as good, it is only I who choose to say that it is good and not bad. Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly. So every man ought to say, “Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do.” If a man does not say that, he is dissembling his anguish. Clearly, the anguish with which we are concerned here is not one that could lead to quietism or inaction. It is anguish pure and simple, of the kind well known to all those who have borne responsibilities. When, for instance, a military leader takes upon himself the responsibility for an attack and sends a number of men to their death, he chooses to do it and at bottom he alone chooses. No doubt under a higher command, but its orders, which are more general, require interpretation by him and upon that interpretation depends the life of ten, fourteen or twenty men. In making the decision, he cannot but feel a certain anguish. All leaders know that anguish. It does not prevent their acting, on the contrary it is the very condition of their action, for the action presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities, and in choosing one of these, they realize that it has value only because it is chosen. Now it is anguish of that kind which existentialism describes, and moreover, as we shall see, makes explicit through direct responsibility towards other men who are concerned. Far from being a screen which could separate us from action, it is a condition of action itself.

And when we speak of “abandonment” we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end. It is nowhere written that “the good” exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote: “If God did not exist, everything would be permitted”; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimise our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. – We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does. The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion. Neither will an existentialist think that a man can find help through some sign being vouchsafed upon earth for his orientation: for he thinks that the man himself interprets the sign as he chooses. He thinks that every man, without any support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man.

As an example by which you may the better understand this state of abandonment, I will refer to the case of a pupil of mine, who sought me out in the following circumstances. His father was quarrelling with his mother and was also inclined to be a “collaborator”; his elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and this young man, with a sentiment somewhat primitive but generous, burned to avenge him. His mother was living alone with him, deeply afflicted by the semi-treason of his father and by the death of her eldest son, and her one consolation was in this young man. But he, at this moment, had the choice between going to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live. He fully realised that this woman lived only for him and that his disappearance – or perhaps his death – would plunge her into despair. He also realised that, concretely and in fact, every action he performed on his mother’s behalf would be sure of effect in the sense of aiding her to live, whereas anything he did in order to go and fight would be an ambiguous action which might vanish like water into sand and serve no purpose. For instance, to set out for England he would have to wait indefinitely in a Spanish camp on the way through Spain; or, on arriving in England or in Algiers he might be put into an office to fill up forms. Consequently, he found himself confronted by two very different modes of action; the one concrete, immediate, but directed towards only one individual; and the other an action addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity, but for that very reason ambiguous – and it might be frustrated on the way. At the same time, he was hesitating between two kinds of morality; on the one side the morality of sympathy, of personal devotion and, on the other side, a morality of wider scope but of more debatable validity. He had to choose between those two. What could help him to choose?

You may say that the youth did, at least, go to a professor to ask for advice. But if you seek counsel – from a priest, for example you have selected that priest; and at bottom you already knew, more or less, what he would advise. In other words, to choose an adviser is nevertheless to commit oneself by that choice. Had this young man chosen a priest of the resistance, or one of the collaboration, he would have decided beforehand the kind of advice he was to receive. Similarly, in coming to me, he knew what advice I should give him, and I had but one reply to make. You are free, therefore choose, that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world. The Catholics will reply, “Oh, but they are!” Very well; still, it is I myself, in every case, who have to interpret the signs. Who can doubt but that this decision as to the meaning of the sign was his, and his alone? For the decipherment of the sign, however, he bears the entire responsibility. That is what “abandonment” implies, that we ourselves decide our being. And with this abandonment goes anguish.

We have now, I think, dealt with a certain number of the reproaches against existentialism. You have seen that it cannot be regarded as a philosophy of quietism since it defines man by his action; nor as a pessimistic description of man, for no doctrine is more optimistic, the destiny of man is placed within himself. Nor is it an attempt to discourage man from action since it tells him that there is no hope except in his action, and that the one thing which permits him to have life is the deed. Upon this level therefore, what we are considering is an ethic of action and self-commitment.

### Presentation: Artist Slideshows (ULO 1-4)

* [Unit 1-1: Abstraction](http://jonathangabel.com/documents/art125/ppt/Art125Unit01-01.Abstraction.pptx)
* [Unit 1-2: QuantifyAbstraction](http://jonathangabel.com/documents/art125/ppt/Art125Unit01-02.QuantifyAbstraction.pptx)
* [Unit 1-3: ReturnToAbstraction](http://jonathangabel.com/documents/art125/ppt/Art125Unit01-03.ReturnToAbstraction.pptx)
* [Unit 1-4: Expressionism](http://jonathangabel.com/documents/art125/ppt/Art125Unit01-04.Expressionism.pptx)

### Interactive activities: artwork identification, and terminology (multiple chances, self assess)(ULO 1, 2)

#### Multiple Choice

Q: What does Sartre mean when he says "existence precedes essence"? A. Mankind first comes into being, and then later defines himself. B. You are who you are, and this is what makes you an individual. C. God is no longer in control of punishing humanity. D. Mankind possesses a "human nature". ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q: How does Sartre use the term "abandonment"? A. He uses it to say that if we don't believe in a God who decides everything, then we must take responsibility for our own actions. B. He says once we are abandoned by family we set out on our own. C. We must abandon ideas of right and wrong. D. He believes abandoning action brings us to a purer state of being. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q: What does Sartre mean by saying we are "condemned to be free"? A. We did not choose to come into being, and yet we are born free and must from the moment we are aware become responsible for everything that we do. B. We are lost in the world, condemned to die alone. C. Soldiers can choose to join the resistance, but cannot choose where they will be sent. D. God has abandoned us, and we must now impose morality on others. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q: Define "figurative abstraction" A. Artwork that, although using abstraction, still represents the human figure. B. Artwork that, although using abstraction, still retains reference to real objects. C. Art which does not try to represent objects from the known world. D. Art that tries to express an emotional experience rather than the external world. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q: Define "representational abstraction" A. Artwork that, although using abstraction, still retains reference to real objects. B. Artwork that, although using abstraction, still includes the human figure. C. Art which does not try to represent objects from the known world. D. Artwork made primarily of large areas of solid color. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q: Define "non-representational abstraction" A. Art which does not try to represent objects from the known world. B. Artwork that, although using abstraction, still retains reference to real objects. C. Artwork that, although using abstraction, is based on the human figure. D. Artwork made primarily of large areas of solid color. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q: Define "expressionism" A. Art that tries to express an emotional experience rather than the external world. B. Artwork that, although using abstraction, still represents the human figure. C. Artwork that emphasizes compositional elements such as shape and color over content. D. Art which does not try to represent objects from the known world. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q: Define "formalism" A. Artwork that emphasizes compositional elements such as shape and color over content. B. Artwork made primarily of large areas of solid color. C. Art that tries to express an emotional experience rather than the external world. D. Art which does not try to represent objects from the known world. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q: Define "color field painting" A. Artwork made primarily of large areas of solid color. B. Art which does not try to represent objects from the known world. C. Artwork that emphasizes compositional elements such as shape and color over content. D. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

### Discussion Board Question

As this is our first week, this is our chance to get familiar with the on line discussion boards. Each week is will work the same way. Note that you have TWO DEADLINES, one for your first post and one for your follow up posts. This is so we have the chance to get discussions going during the week. This is how it will work:

First, you will start a thread by answering the Essay question below.

Then you will reply to at least two (2) other students posts to get the discussion going.

Please make sure you meet the due dates for these posts.

#### Essay Question:

Sartre talks a lot about the anxiety of life, and the expressionist work we looked at deals with the anxiety of modern life too. Please write a couple sentences linking the ideas presented in Sartre's lecture and the images of expressionist painting. You can refer to the images from the slideshow, or do your own research and link to an image of any artworks you find.

For reference, these are the works displayed in the slideshow:

Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Alterpiece, 1512-1516, Germany

Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Alterpiece, 1512-1516, Germany

Francisco Goya, The Third of May, 1808

Francisco Goya, The Third of May, 1808

Francisco Goya, Saturn Devouring His Sons, 1819

Francisco Goya, Saturn Devouring His Sons, 1819

James Ensor, Two Skeletons Fighting Over a Herring, 1891

James Ensor, Two Skeletons Fighting Over a Herring, 1891

Edvard Munch, The Scream, 1893

Edvard Munch, The Scream, 1893

Kathy Kollwitz, Woman With Dead Child, 1903

Kathy Kollwitz, Woman With Dead Child, 1903

Emil Nolde, Masks, 1911, Germany

Emil Nolde, Masks, 1911, Germany

Otto Dix, Stormtroopers Advancing Under Gas, 1924, Germany

Otto Dix, Stormtroopers Advancing Under Gas, 1924, Germany

### Voice Thread Question

This is our chance to get familiar with the voice thread technology. We have two pictures to look at here, one that is formalist, and one that is expressionist. I want you to leave a voice thread on each one where you point out one thing that you find engaging about the picture.

### Optional links for further self-study (ULO 1-4)

*You will not be tested on the following material, but if you are interested in studying further anything we discussed this week, these links are a good place to start:*

* Prehistoric Porn: [The Venus of Hohle Fels:](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/14/venus-of-hohle-fels-prehi_n_203418.html)
* Sartre's [Existentialism Is a Humaninsm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm) (*full text*)
* [The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation](http://www.albersfoundation.org/)